

Resolution of the SEP (U K) Fourth National Congress

The resurgence of the class struggle and the tasks of the Socialist Equality Party (UK): Part Two

The Socialist Equality Party (UK)**4 December 2018**

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The social catastrophe in Britain

20. The Grenfell Tower Fire on June 14, 2017 was a seminal event. The horrific loss of 72 lives starkly exposed the reality of class relations in Britain. As the SEP commented, “There are events in world history that lead to a fundamental change in consciousness and create the basis for developing a socialist political orientation among broad masses of workers. The June 14 Grenfell Tower inferno is such an event.” The fire was an act of social murder, responsibility for which lies with successive Conservative and Labour governments and councils. They have destroyed Britain’s social infrastructure and turned London into a playground for the rich, while socially cleansing working people and the poor. That is why, despite the crocodile tears of royalty and the political establishment, no one has been held to account. The government-mandated inquiry is a cover-up. It cannot allow the truth to come out because Grenfell is only the most egregious example of how the lives of workers and their families are sacrificed to satiate the super-rich.

21. This is a deliberate policy. In a devastating critique of the impact of austerity, the United Nations special rapporteur Philip Alston commented, at the conclusion of his two-week visit to the poorest areas of the UK in November 2018, “In the area of poverty-related policy, the evidence points to the conclusion that the driving force has not been economic but rather a commitment to achieving radical social re-engineering ... Key elements of the post-war Beveridge social contract are being overturned.” According to the *British Medical Journal*, austerity can be linked to 120,000 extra deaths since 2010. It estimates that between 2015 and 2020, an extra 100 people will die every day. The growth in life expectancy has now stopped and has decreased in some areas. This reversal is the fastest rate of any leading industrialised nation, outside of the United States. “Unexplained” infant mortality has increased and is highest in the most deprived areas. At least 320,000 people are homeless, with the numbers increasing by 1,000 people a month, meaning one in every 200 adults is without a permanent place to live. At least one person dies on the streets each day, yet the majority of homeless are in employment. Drug addiction, too, is rising, as are instances of suicide. With 4,500 suicides annually, this is now the leading causing of death amongst men below 50 years of age, while it has risen 67 percent amongst teenagers since 2010. The UK government has the dubious distinction of being the first in the world to appoint a Minister for Suicide Prevention.

22. Workers in Britain have suffered a decline in wages unsurpassed for more than a century, falling further than any European country except Greece. The official jobless rate of 4.1 percent conceals large numbers of mainly young workers, who have been driven off the employment rolls, and more than 7 million people—one in every five workers—who are in precarious employment. At least 6 percent of the workforce is on zero-hour contracts, rising from 1.7 million to 1.8 million last year. More than 14 million people, including 4.5 million children, one-third of all children, live below the poverty line. More than two-thirds are comprised of the “working poor.” The use of food banks has doubled, with the Trussell Trust delivering almost one and a half million three-day emergency food supplies in the first three months of 2018. Food bank usage and the resort to extortionate pay-day loans has grown, even among professionals. The roll-out of the punitive Universal Credit benefits system has left thousands without any means of support. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation estimated that around 1.5 million people were destitute last year, including 300,000 children. UK households collectively owe £400 billion in personal debt, the highest on record, on average spending £900 more than they received in income during 2017. Every three minutes last year, one person sought help for issues related to non-payment of rent, utility bills or council tax.

23. The situation facing young workers is most severe. The ruling class is using this generation to set a new benchmark for the exploitation of the entire working class. The gig economy now accounts for more than five million workers, most of them young. Those employed in this sector are not even guaranteed the minimum wage. The norm now is zero-hour contracts and no pensions, sick leave, holiday or redundancy pay. Even as earnings overall have fallen, young workers aged 30 years and under have been especially impacted. In the last 20 years, the pay differential between those aged 30 and below, and those over 30 years of age, has increased by 50 percent. Young workers’ pay has fallen by 16 percent since 2008. Warehouse and distribution centres such as Amazon and call centres proliferate, where the latest technology is used to enforce maximum productivity at the expense of employees’ health. Millions of students and graduates face rising levels of debt, due to the hiking up of tuition fees to £9,240 a year. With interest repayments at 6.3 percent, average student debt is £57,000 with the student debt loan book expected to reach £1 trillion by 2025. Many will never be able to pay off their loans, as a university education is no longer a route to a decent job.

24. In a country that once prided itself on its social safety net, “from the cradle to the grave,” essential services have been gutted. Little remains of the founding ethos of the National Health Service. Subject to severe funding cuts, whole areas of healthcare have been turned over to giant

corporations, such as Richard Branson's Virgin Care. Waiting lists have soared, leaving many with debilitating and life-threatening illnesses, or pushed into seeking expensive private provision. Almost half of all maternity units in English hospitals were closed to expectant mothers at least once last year, with some shut for weeks. In education, schools have suffered a real-term funding cut of £2.7 billion since 2015. In the next two years, nine out of 10 schools will see cuts in real terms, while further education colleges, catering predominantly for working class youth, have been the biggest losers in education spending over the last 25 years. Central government funding to local authorities has been slashed by £11.3 billion, and by 2020 local authorities will have lost 75 percent of the grant they received in 2015. Almost half of all councils will receive no central government funding by 2019/20, leaving a funding gap of £5.8 billion. The response of some local authorities has been to halt all but emergency spending and, in moves pioneered by Labour councils, to become property speculators, selling off social assets to private developers and earning themselves windfalls in the process.

25. The money looted by government from working people and essential services is funnelled into the coffers of the super-rich, so that the UK is now home to the largest number of billionaires on record—134—with London host to 86, more than any other city in the world. Since 2016, the wealth of Britain's top 1,000 has grown by 14 percent to £658 billion, more than the combined wealth of the poorest 40 percent of the population (10.3 million families). Such a social divide has revolutionary implications, as was acknowledged by Martin Sandbu in the *Financial Times*: "To borrow a Marxian term, the social contradictions are more acute [in the UK] than elsewhere and may have been so more often than not throughout history... The more tense are the pent-up springs of opposite extremes forced together, the more disruptive is the snap when it ultimately comes." **Brexit and the drive to trade and military war**

26. The outcome of the 2016 referendum on Britain leaving the EU has produced an unprecedented crisis of class rule. The May government faces possible collapse due to the sharpening divisions within the Tory Party over an agreement with the EU to prevent a "hard Brexit." Even the constitutional and territorial integrity of the United Kingdom has been thrown into question by the impact of Brexit on both Scotland and Northern Ireland. With Labour still torn apart by the efforts of its right-wing to remove Jeremy Corbyn as leader, the ruling elite is deeply divided over whether a general election can break the deadlock, with many urging a second referendum to overturn the 2016 result. Meanwhile, there are dire warnings of a national crisis and escalating social conflict, of failures in supply chains and talk that the police and armed forces are readying for a national emergency.

27. The SEP rejected the false binary "choice" offered in the 2016 referendum, insisting that the responsibility of genuine socialists "is to define a policy that upholds the interests of workers not only in Britain, but in Europe as a whole and throughout the world." This was critical, it warned, as the "biggest political danger in this situation is the mixing of class banners on the basis of the espousal of a supposedly 'left nationalism'... subordinating the working class to an initiative aimed at shifting political life even further along a nationalist trajectory, thereby strengthening and emboldening the far-right in the UK and across Europe, while weakening the political defences of the working class." Calling for an active boycott of the referendum, the SEP explained, "There can be no good outcome of such a plebiscite. Whichever side wins, working people will pay the price ... A boycott prepares the ground for the development of an independent political struggle of the British working class against these forces. Such a movement must develop as part of a continent-wide counteroffensive by the working class, which will expose the referendum as only an episode in the deepening existential crisis of the British and European bourgeoisie."

28. This was in sharp contrast to all the pseudo-left tendencies, who

lined up behind one or another faction of the bourgeoisie. The Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party, advocates of a "Left Leave" vote, acted as an appendage of a campaign led by the most right-wing sections of the Tory Party and the UK Independence Party. As for Left Unity, Socialist Resistance and the Alliance for Workers Liberty, they lined up behind Corbyn and the Labour Party in backing the Remain camp and its promotion of the EU as a bulwark of social progress against nationalism. Likewise, in the referendum's aftermath, they are working to politically confuse and mislead workers and youth by parroting the demands to either "honour" the Leave vote or support a second "people's vote" to overturn the result. Both arguments are yet another cynical pseudo-democratic smokescreen, aimed at obscuring that, whatever their disagreements, the Leave and Remain camps are united in their support for NATO, demands for more military spending and provocations against Russia—and, above all, in their determination to deepen the savage assault on the working class.

29. Events since the Brexit referendum have proved that in a globally integrated economy it is impossible to secure economic progress or defend democratic and social rights on a national basis. The Leave campaign's rhetoric of "reclaiming sovereignty" was only ever an assertion of the "sovereign right" of British capital to better exploit the working class and secure more favourable investment and trade relations with the US, China and the emerging markets. The Brexiteers' dismissal of warnings from industry and the City over the economic impact of Brexit is based on the calculation that a hard rupture will create the necessary political crisis for the imposition of economic shock-therapy and the realisation of their preferred "Singapore economic model." Their plan for a free trade deal between the UK and US argues for the complete privatisation of the NHS and a bonfire of consumer, environmental and worker protections. Their geostrategic calculations centre on aligning themselves with the Trump administration and its unilateralist turn against Europe in order to crack open the Single European Market, while establishing relations with far-right pro-US governments and parties on the continent, as allies against Germany and France.

30. Fear of economic dislocation, combined with hostility to the overt xenophobia and nationalism of the leading Brexiteers, and restrictions on travel and work within the EU, has increased support for a second referendum on Brexit. But these legitimate concerns are exploited by the political representatives of the dominant sections of the ruling elite, who are just as hostile to the working class as the pro-Brexit Tories. The Remain faction's real concern is how best to ensure British imperialism's global position. The Labour Party, dissident Tories, the Liberal Democrats, Scottish National Party and the Greens want to ensure continued tariff-free access to European markets, on which Britain depends for 40 percent of its trade, and which has guaranteed London's position as a global financial centre. That is why there is no hint of opposition among them to a domestic agenda of continued austerity, and why they are silent on what EU membership really means for working people—as evidenced in Greece, where extreme poverty has doubled, social services have collapsed and the economy has shrunk by 25 percent as a result of EU dictates.

31. The acute polarisation of society between the mass of working people struggling to survive and a grotesquely rich oligarchy is incompatible with the preservation of democratic forms of rule—whether in or out of the EU. Already five years ago, Edward Snowden revealed the existence of the surveillance programs PRISM and Tempora, through which Britain's GCHQ colluded with the US intelligence agencies in spying on millions of people throughout the world, to identify political threats and to destabilise and undermine their opponents. Britain now operates one of the highest levels of state surveillance and censorship in the world, including numerous legal restrictions of online communication and "voluntary" arrangements with ISPs. The ongoing parliamentary

inquiry into further internet regulation, under the guise of clamping down on “fake news” and Russian interference, will inevitably end in the imposition of still more onerous restrictions.

32. Such police state measures are in line with a massive escalation of militarism, on which all factions of the bourgeoisie are agreed. The Commons Defence Committee has proposed to increase defence spending from 2 to 3 percent, on the grounds that it is the “only solution” to the “serious risk” of the army “being outgunned by its Russian counterpart,” warning that “[d]iminished capacity reduces the UK’s usefulness to the US and our influence within NATO.” To this end the UK, despite disagreements over the nature of relations with the US and NATO, is still taking full part in plans to develop a European military capability. War requires the suppression of anti-war and socialist opposition at home. This is behind the “Fusion Doctrine” initiated by the National Security Council Capability Review, in which government, the military and the security services, corporations, the BBC and the other media, charities and NGOs are to be welded together in a unified security strategy directed against Russia and other unnamed “state actors.”

33. The task facing working people is not to help resolve the crisis facing the bourgeoisie, as Corbyn and the Labour Party insist, but to secure its independent class interests in a common struggle with its class brothers and sisters throughout the European continent. The International Committee’s European sections, the SEP in Britain, the Parti de l’égalité socialiste (PES) in France and the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP) in Germany, together with our co-thinkers in Turkey, Ireland and throughout the world, seek to mobilise the working class against the nationalist splintering of the European continent and the growth of far-right movements, while rejecting any support for the EU and its constituent national governments. The rule of the financial oligarchy and its governments must be broken and replaced with government of, by and for the working class—a socialist Britain as part of the United Socialist States of Europe. The adoption of this perspective would bring the most powerful social force into action—the European working class.

A balance sheet of Corbynism

34. Three years after taking the Labour leadership as the undeserving beneficiary of a leftward shift amongst workers, and especially youth, Corbyn and his Stalinist and pseudo-left coterie have reneged on every single one of his minimal reformist pledges. Despite widespread demands for change among the hundreds of thousands of new members that flooded into the party, he has opposed efforts to kick out the right-wing and issued instructions to Labour councils to abide by Tory spending limits and implement cuts. So completely does the right-wing continue to dominate Labour policy that the party’s 2017 general election manifesto was largely indistinguishable from that under Ed Miliband, with its pledge for Trident’s renewal, support for NATO, and commitment to a “fiscal credibility rule” that prohibits any end to austerity. Corbyn’s commitment to the interests of British capital is behind his promise, on Brexit, to oppose any deal that does not guarantee access to the European Single Market. This is combined with a rejection of free movement and support for “managed migration.” Above all, wherever the class struggle erupts, Corbyn functions as the high priest of class compromise, sermonising on the need for a swift return to negotiations.

35. The SEP’s rejection of the claims advanced by the pseudo-left that Corbyn’s leadership offered a “socialist” rebirth of Labour, has been vindicated. For more than a century, the Labour Party has functioned as the primary political pillar of capitalist rule in Britain—from its betrayal of the 1926 General Strike, the split to form the national government with the Tories in 1931 to administer austerity, and the formation of a second government of national unity to support the Second World War. Labour underwent a further transformation in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 by the Stalinist bureaucracy. As the ICFI analysed, advances in science and technology enabled the development of

globalised production, which exploits the labour power of the working class as a global workforce. This ripped the ground from under the feet of the old nationally-based labour organisations, which became the direct instruments of their own bourgeoisie in eliminating workers’ past social gains to secure global competitiveness. This process was epitomised by the Blair Labour government. Repudiating any connection with the working class, it transferred more wealth to the oligarchy than Margaret Thatcher did, joined the illegal war against Iraq in 2003, and bailed out the banks in 2008. As the SEP warned following Corbyn’s election in 2015, “No one can seriously propose that a party which, in its politics, organisation and the social composition of its apparatus, is Tory in all but name, can be transformed into an instrument of working-class struggle.”

36. Historically, the reformist pledges of the “left” have played a key role in subordinating the working class to Labour. Even so, the ruling class has viewed those carrying out this carefully calibrated task with deep suspicion, aware that they are policing dangerous militant and socialist sentiment in the working class. Writing in 1925, Leon Trotsky explained that the left-wing noises of the Labour leadership were made “not at all with the intention of arousing the workers to drive the capitalists out, but merely to urge the capitalists along the road of ‘progressive efforts’... if this pathetic scaremongering has any effect at all, it is in the opposite direction. Every serious British bourgeois understands that behind the mock-heroic threats of the Labour party leaders there lies concealed a real danger from the deeply stirring proletarian masses.” (Trotsky, *Where is Britain Going?* New Park, 1978, p.15) Any indication that the left might lose control has been met with deep-state intrigues—including the forged Zinoviev Letter in the 1920s, the destabilisation of the Wilson government in the 1970s and the fashioning of the right-wing, break-away Social Democratic Party and the forced resignation of Labour’s leader, Michael Foot, in the 1980s.

37. It is the danger from the “stirring proletarian masses” that accounts for the hysterical attacks by the Blairites and the mainstream media against Corbyn. But it is Corbyn’s innumerable retreats that have given them free rein in their vicious political offensive for his removal, centred on smears of anti-Semitism. Led, behind-the-scenes, by the military-intelligence agencies of Britain, the US and Israel, the target is not primarily Corbyn, but the workers and young people who rallied to his pledge against austerity and war. Drawing an equals sign between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism is aimed at silencing criticism of Israel and its brutal treatment of the Palestinians. But it is also part of efforts to criminalise anti-imperialist and socialist views, while legitimising Europe’s far-right parties as defenders of Israel based on their espousal of anti-Muslim prejudice and support for imperialist intervention in the Middle East. The 2018 congress of the European Jewish Association devoted an entire session to the “existential threat” represented by a Corbyn government, while reaching out to the AfD, Freedom Party of Austria and other formations because, as one participant declared, “It’s impossible to classify European parties as Left or Right. Everything has changed.”

38. The equation of Nazism and socialism is a historic libel. The emergence of modern anti-Semitism from the 1920s as a mass political movement in Germany and other European countries, was bound up with efforts to mobilise petty-bourgeois and lumpen layers as a shock force to destroy the organised workers’ movement. This was the precondition for an eruption of militarism, aimed at securing the markets and territory required by imperialism. Anti-Marxism was Hitler’s driving obsession, to which he counterposed ethnic German nationalism. His hatred of the Jews was based on their association with the socialist movement. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler wrote of his “conviction” that “the question of the future of the German nation is the question of the destruction of Marxism ... In Russian Bolshevism we must see the attempt undertaken by the Jews in the twentieth century to achieve world domination.”

39. None of those complaining about the threat facing Britain's Jews from a Corbyn-led government have any qualms about allying themselves with Hitler's successors. Tory MEPs voted to defend Hungary's Viktor Orban in the European Parliament in September and set up the European Conservatives and Reformists grouping to unify the far-right in Europe. Boris Johnson and other leading Tories meet with Trump's fascist former adviser, Steve Bannon, who promotes the far-right Britain First, and anti-Muslim demagogue Tommy Robinson, whose supporters have been involved in attacks on left-wing bookshops and trade unionists, and the murder of Labour MP Jo Cox. Other leading Tories, such as Toby Young, advocate "progressive eugenics," appearing alongside leading fascist exponents of racial superiority at the prestigious University College London, to assert that global inequalities are the result of "mental capacity" and call for the "phasing out of incompetent cultures."

40. There is widespread hostility to the Blairite conspiracy among workers and Labour Party members. This has been expressed in protests, especially in London, against the social cleansing carried out by Labour councils, as well as numerous successful no-confidence and censure motions against sitting MPs and a 50,000-strong petition to Labour's annual conference calling for mandatory reselection. In each instance, it has been Corbyn, and his supporters within the Labour Party and the trade unions, who have sought to smother the fight against the right-wing, including vetoing mandatory selection at Labour's conference. Unmasking Corbyn's left pretensions is critical, especially under conditions in which the crisis over Brexit and the disintegration of the Tories could bring a Labour government to power. His constant policy shifts and abasement before the right-wing are in preparation for this possibility.

41. The SEP has lent critical support to the efforts waged by Labour members against the Blairites, urging them to "Drive out the right-wing!" This call is directed not to Corbyn, but to the rank-and-file. It is an appeal to Labour members to reject Corbyn's soporifics and take up an independent political struggle. While solidarising with this struggle, the SEP warns that Corbyn and his coterie would rather see their own supporters expelled, than break with the Blairites. Events in the London borough of Haringey are telling. Popular opposition to the planned destruction of public housing, in a £2 billion sell-off of public assets and the imposition of cuts, led to the deselection of Blairite councillors and the resignation of the council's leader. Months later the newly elected "Corbyn council" announced a 10 percent overall budget cut on top of the 40 percent imposed by the Blairites, after McDonnell insisted that they must run a "prudent, responsible authority." Under these conditions the call to kick out the right-wing can provide a mechanism to advance the class struggle, break the stranglehold of the Corbynites and strengthen the influence and political authority of the SEP.

42. As important as any such tactical initiative is in the arsenal of the party, it is always directed towards, and subordinate to, the building of the Marxist revolutionary party. In its June 10, 2017 statement, "Britain's general election: A new stage in the class struggle," the SEP stressed that "the greatest political danger is to identify the radicalisation of the masses with the initial and undeserving political beneficiaries such as Corbyn." This was based on the lesson drawn from the warning made in 1967 by the Socialist Labour League, then the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, to the then-French section, the Internationalist Communist Organisation (OCI). The OCI was moving in a pronounced centrist direction, under conditions of the beginning of a major political shift in the working class that was soon to take on revolutionary dimensions. The SLL cautioned the OCI: *There is always a danger at such a stage of development that a revolutionary party responds to the situation in the working class not in a revolutionary way, but by adaptation to the level of struggle to which the workers are restricted by their own experience under the old leaderships, i.e., to the inevitable*

initial confusion. Such revisions of the fight for the independent party and the Transitional Programme are usually dressed up in the disguise of getting closer to the working class, unity with all those in struggle, not posing ultimatums, abandoning dogmatism, etc. "

43. Corbyn's overarching concern is to preserve the domination of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy over the working class, which routinely employs the possibility of a Labour government to stem rising social anger and demands for change. But the re-emergence of the class struggle that is now underway means this is not sufficient. With the support of the Trades Union Congress, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell champions the "new economy" plan of the Blairite Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR). This calls for an "activist role" for government to reverse low productivity and boost industrial competitiveness to place the UK economy on a trade war footing. A central role is assigned to the unions as an arm of corporate management and the state apparatus in policing the workforce, with the IPPR advocating a "social partnership" between the Bank of England, Treasury, big business and the trade union bureaucracy.

44. As Trotsky warned in 1935: "Should the electoral successes of the Labour Party raise it once again to power, the consequences would not be a peaceful socialist transformation of Great Britain, but the consolidation of imperialist reaction, that is to say, an epoch of civil war, in the face of which the leadership of the Labour Party will inevitably reveal its complete bankruptcy." (*Documents of the Fourth International: The Formative Years (1933-40)*, p.67) The character of any incoming Labour government and its role is already being mapped out. After first meeting with MI5 for a briefing on the threat of "extremism," Corbyn then met with Alex Younger, the head of the Secret Intelligence Service, MI6, to discuss the necessary preparations for a possible snap election in the event of the failure of Brexit negotiations. The implications of such discussions were made clear by the head of the Armed Forces, General Sir Nick Carter, who confirmed the existence of "sensible contingency plans ... Whether it's a terrorist attack or whether it's a tanker drivers' dispute, industrial action or whatever else it might be."

To be continued



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